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President Offers Eased Leak Rule

Would Modify Plan for Pre-Publication Approval

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan Administration, bowing to opposition from some of the President's own aides as well as members of Congress, is backing away from one of the most controversial elements of its program to halt leaks of government secrets. The Times has learned.

Justice Department officials have told members of Congress that the Administration is prepared to modify its unpopular edict, issued last October, requiring more than 100,000 top federal employees to agree to submit to the government for pre-publication approval anything they write about national security during the rest of their lives.

Acting Assistant Atty. Gen. Richard Willard, who has headed the effort to enforce the policy, said in an interview that he has begun negotiations with members of Congress who oppose the program in hopes of reaching a compromise. "It is always better to operate by consensus than by confrontation," he said, "and for that reason, I am very hopeful that we can reach a compromise."

Willard agreed to consider a compromise after Congress voted last October to block implementation of the order until at least April 15.

According to Sen. Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.), who authored the congressional moratorium, the rule would create "a system which would allow the officials of one Administration to censor the writings of their predecessors."

Opposition to the rule has been so widespread that it even includes some of the President's own aides, such as White House counsel Fred Fielding. Even before Congress imposed the moratorium, White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker III declined to force members of the President's staff to agree to the rule. Top Justice Department officials also have been privately critical of the censorship policy.

Administration officials who declined to be identified said that the rule, which was the brainchild of former national security adviser William P. Clark, has lost support inside the White House since Clark left to become secretary of the Interior. These officials predicted that the issue soon would be "reargued" with the President in hopes of winning his approval to drop it.

The rule, which resulted from a directive signed by the President last March 11, would require all federal employees with access to highly classified information to sign a five-page document obligating them to submit all of their future writings to government censors. The March 11 directive also expanded the use of lie detector tests for government employees suspected of leaking information, but the congressional moratorium did nothing to change that policy.

Willard acknowledged that very few of the affected 112,000 government employees have signed the agreement, although it was issued Aug. 30, two months before the Republican-controlled Senate voted 56 to 34 to halt implementation of the policy. The moratorium took effect Nov. 22 after being approved by the House.

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